

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 6-BWASHINGTON TIMES
22 October 1986

U.S. tries to repair damage after 'disinformation' flap

By Richard Beeston
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The Libyan Interagency Task Force will meet here this week to assess the damage to the Reagan administration's credibility from a report this month that White House officials organized a campaign of disinformation to undermine Libya's leader, Col. Muammar Qaddafi.

It will be the first full meeting of the task force — which includes representatives of the State Department, the National Security Council, the Pentagon, the CIA and the Departments of Commerce, Justice and the Treasury — since an Oct. 2 report by Bob Woodward in The Washington Post revealed the use of deception to rattle Col. Qaddafi.

Participants also will see what can be salvaged from the administration's desire to unseat Col. Qaddafi, whom it has singled out as a central figure in planning and supporting terrorism worldwide.

False reports to keep the Libyan leader off balance were only one

part of the overall plan, according to one administration official, but disclosure of the disinformation campaign has affected every area of the operation. Last Sunday, the president's national security adviser, John Poindexter, declared again that the plan had been intended to deceive Col. Qaddafi but was "never targeted at the American press."

However, a widely held perception that the administration lied to the American media has left the task force with the job of assessing how much the episode has weakened its credibility for future action.

"It's got us into a hole," one official said. "Our credibility has been more damaged than the plan itself."

Until recently, general public support was a positive factor for the administration in its anti-Qaddafi policies. Now officials must consider public doubts.

The overall plan, worked out in August, was framed to protect U.S. interests against future Libyan-backed terrorist attacks and to try to

bring about Col. Qaddafi's replacement.

Efforts to deter Libyan-backed terrorism included psychological warfare to throw Col. Qaddafi off balance or knock him over the psychic edge. They also involved improved intelligence, closer cooperation and information-sharing with allied security services and increased surveillance of suspects.

Western intelligence sources consider Libya ripe for a leadership change, but there is no obvious candidate to replace Col. Qaddafi. Despite growing unrest in the military, the armed forces are afraid of opposing him, and the security apparatus had no difficulty keeping him in power when he was unable to make decisions and was roaming the desert after U.S. bombing raids last April 15.

Col. Qaddafi has bounced back, with enough confidence to resume making threats.

After the bombing there was a distinct pause in Libya's terrorist related activities. But more recently, according to intelligence sources, there have been indications of a resurgence, including some evidence of Libyan involvement in the Sept. 5 attack against a Pan Am jetliner at Karachi airport.